

## Major Gift Fundraising: It's all about the Relationship and Shared Values

By: Maxine Epstein, 8/31/09

Major gift fundraising has four major steps: the first step is to identify your major gift prospects, the second is in cultivating and building a relationship, the third is in making the “ask” and the final step is thanking the donor. Fundraising is not brain surgery, but it does require appropriate prior planning and strategizing in identifying who among your potential donors are at the major gift level, cultivating and building these relationships and choosing the right person to make the “ask”. Lastly, yet most importantly, is thanking the donor...many times.

According to Steve Manzi and Elliot Kipnis, authors of “The Art and Science of Major Gift Fundraising, **identifying major gift prospects relies on quantifiable information** - such as what was the donor’s prior giving (both to your organization and others) and how often and how recently have they given? Someone who is already a donor and who has been giving for years is often a better prospect than someone who is newly identified and is just getting to know the work and people of the organization or someone who gave a one-time larger gift many years prior. There are many resources available today for identifying a donor’s “capacity” for giving (see list of web resources). In addition, current donors continue to be one of the best sources of referrals of colleagues, peers and associates who may be willing and interested in becoming a major gift donor.

When your major gift prospects are identified it then becomes a big puzzle to figure out **who already has a relationship with the donor, and who from the organization is responsible for cultivating and building the relationship** in the interest of matching common values between the donor and the work of the organization. **Development work is about uncovering shared values and drawing prospects closer to the organization and more deeply into an understanding of why give to this particular organization.** The person responsible for building the relationship is the one who is introducing the organization (or more specifically the values and the needs of the organization) to the potential major gift donor. **“People don’t give to organizations because organizations *have* needs; they give because organizations *meet* needs.” (The Fund Raising School).** You are giving a donor the opportunity to act on their values in a meaningful way.

**Cultivating a relationship with a major gift donor is all about listening.** Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of Kitchen Table Wisdom talks about the power of a story. Stories have the power to heal and change lives. Knowing how to tell and listen to a story is essential to cultivating and developing a relationship with the donor. Everyone has a story. It is our job as good fundraisers to listen to the donor’s story. And after all, who doesn’t like hearing a good story? When you listen, listen intently and make it clear that you care about what the donor has to say. It may not even be about “understanding,” but instead making the donor feel respected, heard and cared about. Once the prospect has been identified, cultivated and the relationship has been built, just **who is the best person to make the “ask”?** If there is an “art” to fundraising it comes into play when making the “ask.” There are some fundraisers who believe in having fundraising teams. Part of the team consists of one person from the organization, perhaps a professional or a Board member of the organization who can “tell the story” or

make the case of the work of the organization; (Yes, mission statements and statistics are good to know and very useful for a Board, but facts and numbers can be cold and hard, and the “bottom line” rarely tells the whole story.) **The person making the “case” must know how to tell the story in words that paint pictures for the prospective donor.** Knowing that 1 in 6 kids across America is illiterate is important, but when you eloquently describe just one child named David, who because of the Coalition for Literacy program, for the first time in his life was able to stand in front of his class and read out loud the first book he ever read on his own. Telling the story brings the donor into the classroom with David.

The second person in the Team is **the person who has the relationship with the donor and who for all practical purposes is a peer or associate of the prospect.** Running Annual Campaigns, from where many major gift donors originate, donors are sometimes grouped by professional affinity groups. Lawyers would mingle, network and be cultivated by other lawyers. Doctors by other doctors etc... Ultimately, the donor would also be “asked” for a gift by another donor in his or her professional affinity group. It is a puzzle strategizing about who the best person or persons are in each major gift solicitation to do the actual “ask”. **This truly is essential for creating a successful solicitation.**

**The “art” of asking is about listening,** funny how that works. Many people are fearful of asking others for money. But that is an entire topic for another time. It is important to be confident and passionate about the work of the organization and what it is you are really asking for. Most non-profits do not raise money for the sake of raising money. Money is simply a tool by which people can be fed, clothed, taught to read, and those most vulnerable in our society can be helped. Whatever the mission of the organization is, the funds raised will allow for a broken world to be repaired. **When making the “ask,” a specific amount should be put forward for the donor’s consideration.** If appropriate homework has been done and capacity of the prospect is known, then the “ask” should be a stretch for him or her. You don’t want to ask for too little. **After the amount has been stated, BE QUIET.** Do not say a word. There is a tendency on the part of solicitors new to the art of fundraising, to fill thoughtful silence with chatter or apologies or words. **Be quiet and just listen.**

No matter the outcome, it is crucial to always thank the donor, then thank them again, and then some more. You write a note, you write a letter and say, “thank you.” **In this work you can never thank a donor enough.** It is also important to know that once a gift is received, the relationship really is just beginning and not ending. Stewardship of an existing major gift donor goes a long way. The more times you can “touch” a donor and engage them in the work of the organization, the more loyal they will remain to the organization. Remember: a donor gives to organizations that they feel emotionally connected to. And once you have successfully cultivated a major gift relationship, always remember that one of the best sources for engaging future potential major gift donors is through the address books of existing major gift donors – so make sure to ask.